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ABSTRACT

The author's experiences of learning her heritage language of Deg Xinag, an Athabascan language spoken in Alaska, serve as a backdrop for discussing issues in learning endangered indigenous languages. When Deg Xinag is taught by linguists, obvious differences between English and Deg Xinag are not articulated, due to the lack of knowledge of cultural contexts and the failure to document language beyond the lexical and grammatical levels. Multilingual teachers are able to provide the context that is often ignored. There are rarely practical dictionaries and grammars available to assist in the learning process. Although writing and studying written language is not considered the best way to learn conversational language, it helps, especially considering the lack of other resources. Regular interactions with native speakers of the language help in learning conversational language. Total Physical Response, a popular way to teach/learn language, involves giving commands that require some action on the part of the learner. However, the Deg Hit'an do not use commands, which reflects a different value system. When recording conversations for use in language learning, there are many issues involved in obtaining permission. Who should have ownership of audiovisual materials? How will the material be used? How will the material be cared for? Where should materials be stored? Who should have access to the materials? Fortunately, there are now indigenous educational models providing examples of contextual/situational learning that can be applied at a grassroots level. (TD)

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Sharing Our Pathways

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Alaska Federation of Natives ◆ University of Alaska ◆ National Science Foundation ◆ Rural School and Community Trust

Documenting Indigenous Knowledge and Languages: Research Planning & Protocol

by Beth Leonard

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Introduction

I have been preparing a research proposal for the Interdisciplinary Ph.D. program at UAF that focuses on "Athabascan Oral Traditions: Deg Hit'an[1] Narratives and Native Ways of Knowing." Much of my current research and language learning centers on kinship and (personal) family histories. Hopefully this research will serve dual purposes in terms of both academic significance and potential value to the Deg Hit'an community.

Research by indigenous researchers for the benefit of indigenous communities also dovetails with political/postmodern movements of self-determination, autonomy and cultural regenesis. Maori researcher, Linda Smith (1999) states: "The cultural and

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1. The term Deg Hit'an ("local people" or "people from around here") is used to refer to the people of Anvik, Shageluk and Holy Cross. Osgood (1936) and subsequently the 1982 ANLC Native Languages map used "Ingalik" which is not a Deg Hit'an word but a Yupi'k word meaning "lice infested."

Guidelines for Strengthening Indigenous Languages

This booklet offers suggestions for Elders, parents, children and educators to use in strengthing their heritage language with support from the Native community, schools, linguists and education agencies. 28 pages, free.

For more information on obtaining copies of these and other cultural guidelines, call the Alaska Native Knowledge Network at 907-474-5086 or e-mail dixie.dayo@uaf.edu.

Contents

Documenting Indigenous Knowledge and Languages 1
Guidelines Adopted for Libraries 6
Guidelines For Alaska Public Libraries 7
Gail Pass Moves On 8
Parenting & Teaching 9
Alutiiq/Unangax Region: Re-establishing Illuani 10
Athabascan Region: Annual Field Trip for the Minto Flats Cultural Atlas 11
Alaska Native Education Summit 12
Southeast Region: Opening the Box of Knowledge 13
Yup'ik Region: Calista Elders Council Expands Services 14
One Among Others 16

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linguistic revitalization movements have tapped into a set of cultural resources that have recentred the roles of indigenous women, of Elders, and of groups who had been marginalized through various colonial practices" (p. 111). Although some Deg Hit'an Elders were recorded during the Alaska Native Literature Project and more recently during the development of *Deg Xinag Dindlidik: Deg Xinag Literacy Manual* there remain several Elders who have not had a chance to record traditional stories and/or lend their perspectives to the history of this area. Deg Hit'an narratives will be valuable as language maintenance efforts proceed and more emphasis is placed on integrating Native knowledge and history into the school curriculum through projects such as the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative.

Researcher's Background

I grew up in Shageluk, Alaska, an Athabascan village on the Innoko River located in the lower-middle Yukon area. I also spent four years in neighboring Anvik, a village on the Yukon approximately 30 miles from Shageluk. My father is James Dementi of Shageluk, a multilingual speaker of Deg Xinag and Holikachuk Athabascan and English. My mother, Jean Dementi, who died in 1988, was a non-Native woman who came to Alaska from California as an Episcopal nurse-evangelist. In 1976 she became Alaska's first woman ordained to the priesthood in the Episcopal church.

Due to a variety of socio-historical influences, most people of my generation did not learn to speak Athabascan. Both the early Episcopal church missionaries and the territorial and Bureau of Indian Affairs schools mandated English and parents had been told not to teach their children the Athabascan language. During the time I lived in Shageluk and Anvik, there were no Athabascan language programs in place in either the school or community. I do, however, remember the first linguists from the Alaska Native Language Center (ANLC) who came to the Shageluk area to work with speakers during the early 1970s. My father and other relatives often worked as consultants in these early language documentation and translation efforts. This contradiction in Native language status, i.e. continuing suppression of local language and culture by churches and schools versus promotion by prestigious outside academic interests, conveyed ambiguous and confusing messages to communities struggling to maintain their local cultures.

Barriers and Challenges in Language Learning

In my current role as language learner—along with other language learners from the Deg Hit'an area—I find myself struggling with the best way to learn the Deg Xinag language and share the knowledge I have documented. Although many of us as language learners work directly with linguists, obvious differences between English and Deg Xinag Athabascan are not articulated and we (the learners) are forced to stumble along as best we can. I believe this is due in part to the lack of knowledge of the deeper Athabascan cultural contexts and constructs and the failure to document language beyond the lexical and grammatical levels.

I was an undergraduate linguistics student when I began my study of Deg Xinag. At that time I had no experience in learning a non-European language and was accustomed to being taught conversational language by experienced teachers using immersion methods. I was also used to

having an extensive collection of practical dictionaries and grammars at my disposal to assist in the learning process. Although there is not a published grammar for Deg Xinag, there are materials that can be used for language learning. To date, publications include one set of verb lessons, a language curriculum for elementary students, one literacy manual, two books of traditional stories, several short children's stories and a limited collection of supplemental learning materials. The verb lessons explain the linguistic structures at an elementary level for language learners, however, as stated above, significant cultural constructs and concepts are not addressed.

Through my academic coursework I would often run across barriers to my own self-confidence in being able to someday speak Deg Xinag fluently. For instance, there is a whole body of research on second language acquisition that says if learning begins after adolescence, the learner cannot expect to become fully fluent in the second language. In a similar vein, linguists often describe Athabascan "as one of the most difficult languages in the world to learn," thereby insinuating that one needs to be of above-average intelligence to indeed even attempt such a process. As a learner and student I have been questioned as to the potential for true authenticity (purity) of Athabascan when learned as a second language and whether or not I think the "back velars"[2] will drop out of the language.

I began my own language learning by asking for phrases in the languages and listening to taped narratives and literacy exercises. I also would sit down with my father and go through sections of the noun dictionary to find the literal meanings of words. I found that, although writing and studying written language is not considered the best way to learn conversational language, it provided a base for further understanding of the language structure and helped with learning the sound system. I continue my study of conversational language through regular interactions with various members of my immediate and extended family. Sometimes this learning takes place in more formal environments such as the ANL 121/122 audioconferences or Athabaskan Language Development Institute's on-campus classes. On most occasions this learning takes place through

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2. Deg Xinag back velars are written with "kk" and "gg," for example, here is a minimal pair which represents both the front and back velars "gag" (berry) and "ggagg" (animal).

Deg Xinag

Sidithniqay James Dementi, Jean yił xivi'ezre'. Sito' Didlang Tochagg nadheyonh. Vidadr (sivadr) Katherine, Susan, Louise yił xivi'ezre'. Katherine Dzox-tsey dhido. Katherine vichoy Patrick viyix dhido yił. Louise viqing' Richard yił Qay Xuchux xiditl'tth'e. Sito' vichidl (sitoy) Gilbert vi'ezre'. Gilbert vi'ot Eleanor yił Cantwell xiditl'tth'e.

Singonh California nadheyonh. Vichidl (sidhi'a) Keith, Don yił xivi'ezre'. Don vi'ot Lucille yił Santa Barbara California xiditl'tth'e. Vidadr (siq'oy) Yvonne vi'ezre'. Yvonne viqing' Richard yił Redding California xiditl'tth'e.

Sitsiy Charlie Cikal Dementi, Charles Aubrey yił xivi'ezre'. Sitsiy Charlie Dementi Dishkaket nadheyonh. Sitsey Lena Phillips Dementi, Ruth Aubrey yił xivi'ezre'. Sitsey Lena Dementi łeggijitno', Niłteghelinghdi' yił nadheyonh. Sitsey viyił xethdlan Clara, Albert xivi'ezre'.

Beth Dementi-Leonard si'ezre'. Deg Hit'an itlanh. łeggijitno', Dzox-tsey, Qay Xuchux, Gitr'ingithchagg xinasiyonh. University of Alaska Fairbanks School of Education q'u'isineyh. Siqing' Michael Leonard vi'ezre'. Clear AFS q'u'idineyh. Siyotr'a' Samantha vi'ezre'. Fairbanks tr'iditl'tth'e.

English

My parents are James and Jean Dementi. My father grew up in Swiftwater (on the Innoko River). His younger sisters (my aunts—father's side) are Katherine, Susan and Louise. Katherine lives in (new) Shageluk. Her grandson Patrick lives at her house also. Louise and her husband Richard live in Anchorage. My father's younger brother (my uncle—father's side) is Gilbert. Gilbert and his wife Eleanor live in Cantwell.

My mother grew up in California. Her younger brothers (my uncles—mother's side) are Keith and Don. Don and his wife Lucille live in Santa Barbara. Her younger sister (my aunt—mother's side) is Yvonne. Yvonne and her husband Richard live in Redding, California.

My grandfathers are Charlie Cikal Dementi and Charles Aubrey. Charlie Dementi grew up in Dishkaket. My grandmothers are Lena Phillips Dementi and Ruth Aubrey. Lena Dementi grew up in Old Shageluk and Lower Village. Her siblings are Clara and Albert.

My name is Beth Dementi-Leonard. I am Deg Hit'an Athabascan. I grew up in Old Shageluk, New Shageluk, Anchorage and Anvik. I work for the UAF School of Education. My husband's name is Michael Leonard. He works at Clear AFS. My daughter's name is Samantha. We live in Fairbanks.

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informal interaction with speakers through visits or phone conversations. I still use a variety of learning methodologies, including writing the language on a regular basis.

One of the more popular ways to teach/learn language involves a method called Total Physical Response (TPR). In English this would require the use of the imperative mode to give a series of commands which require some action on the part of the learner, e.g. come here, open the window, close the door, etc. In Deg Xinag, however, many of these do not equate to commands but describe instead what the subject is doing. In the case of "wake up" for instance (when speaking to a child), a more appropriate way to express this in Deg Xinag is *"Xeledz tr'aningidhit he'?"* which translates to "Are you waking up good?" Examples such as these reflect the deeper value system, i.e., a gentle way of relating to children as they awake.

I am continually impressed with the Deg Xinag speakers' command of English and Athabascan and their strength and resilience considering the damage that has been done since contact. In the past there was a great deal of travel and intermarriage between the Deg Hit'an and Holikachuk areas, so many speakers have command of at least two Athabascan languages. As multilingual speakers, they are aware of our difficulties in learning these languages and are able to provide the context we often ignore. I have observed that in immersion or partial immersion situations, speakers will adapt their use of language so as to not totally overwhelm, but assist learners through individual levels of learning by varying the complexity of their speech.

Fig. 1.

English	Deg Xinag	Literal Translation
black bear	*ggagg* *gichidl*	animal its/the little brother
otter	*tixet'an (te xut'an?)*	water people (?)
water snipe	*teyeg*	water spirit/shadow (its shadow reflects on the water?)
junco	*tegg ney*	"fish" it says (the junco calls when salmon are coming)
yellow pond lilly	*vichingadh ethog*	muskrat's plate
raven	*yixgitsiy*	your (plural) grandfather
rusty blackbird	*yixgitsiy vozra*	raven his nephew
puffball mushroom	*yixgitsiy notchildl*	raven's (sewing) bag

Language Learner As Researcher

"Alaska Native worldviews are oriented toward the synthesis of information gathered from interaction with the natural and spiritual worlds so as to accommodate and live in harmony with natural principles and exhibit the values of sharing, cooperation, and respect" (Kawagley, 11).

Kawagley's observations about Alaska Native worldviews are reflected in my initial research with the *Ingalik Noun Dictionary*. In reviewing this dictionary with my father, I found that the literal translations were not included. For a beginning language learner, literal translations provide a great deal of fascinating cultural information and further impetus for investigation into one's own culture. For example, the Deg Xinag words for birds, fish, animals and plants reflect complex and scientific beliefs and observations (Fig. 1.)

Culturally Appropriate and Respectful Ways of Language Learning

Learners, like myself, who do not have latent knowledge of the language, use a translation approach. Often we inadvertently ask for words or phrases for concepts that do not exist, or concepts that are expressed in very different ways in this cultural context. Learners also tend to provide an incomplete or sometimes total lack of context when requesting words or phrases. As English speakers, we nominalize and decontextualize many concepts, without realizing that Athabascan is a dynamic, verb-based language.

One example of differences between Deg Xinag and English categorization reflects the way one would say "Where are you/where is it?" *Xidanh* is used when referring to people (e.g. *Xidanh si'ot?*—Where is my wife?), whereas *xiday* is used to refer to an animal or object (*Xiday sileg?*—Where is my dog? or *Xiday sigizr?*—Where are my mittens?) The same is true for counting people, animals or objects (*niltayh/niltay*). From what Deg Xinag speakers have said, using these words for "where" and "how many" show respect toward animals who might be offended if the wrong reference is used. This reflects a context of care and respect for animal spirits and other non-human spirits present in the environment, as well as the power of the spoken word.

Fig. 2.

Deg Xinag	English	Literal Translation
Dranh ngi'egh ilyoth.	It's snowing outside today.	Today outside it is snowing.
Getiy ghil yoth.	It really snowed.	Really it snowed.
Chen iiitlyoth.	It started to snow again.	Again it started to snow.
Chen nititlyoth.	It's started to snow again.	Again it's started to snow.

When learners request generic phrases for weather, for instance, it can be difficult for speakers to provide this information when not given a particular context. A more holistic context might provide the following information:

- whether a phenomena is happening now, a little while ago, yesterday, last week, etc.
- if a phenomena is/was happening for the first time during the specified time period, or is/was beginning again
- variations in intensity—a little, very hot/really windy, etc.

These limited examples gathered by members of the language class reflect both major and subtle changes in context (Fig. 2.)

Documenting Oral Sources and Research Issues

I write down new words and phrases gathered from speakers in my family during phone or face-to-face conversations and audioconference classes. ! also record speakers (with their permission) when possible and have several tapes of recorded audioconference classes as well as phrase lists. In the past, I had not really thought about the proper way to obtain permission to record information either in writing or with audiovisual equipment. Often I would ask if I could record, but assumed the speakers knew I would use this information for learning purposes. Now I realize that there are a great many issues to deal with when documenting in writing or with audio/visual equipment, including:

- Who should have ownership of audio/visual materials?
- How will the material be used?
- How will the material be cared for?
- Where should materials be stored?
- Who should have access to the materials?

"Just Speak Your Language"

Lately, it seems the endangered languages bandwagon is a popular vehicle for access to "other," providing many opportunities for publication through description and analysis of various Native language revitalization programs. Outside researchers continue to debate the authenticity and effectiveness of projects and programs from non-indigenous perspectives. Language revitalization, instead of being viewed holistically within social and cultural contexts, is often treated as strictly a linguistic venture, i.e. "just speak your language." "Just speaking your language" assumes abilities and resources are available to assist in this process. It involves learning cultural constructs and concepts often hidden in translation along with a myriad of other environmental, ideological and personal factors. Fortunately there are now indigenous educational models providing examples of contextual/situational learning that can be applied at a local grass-roots level.

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